APPLYING SCIENCE-BASED RESEARCH TO TEACHING ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Richard A. Orem

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the research base on which rests the current best practices of teaching reading to adult English language learners. My focus is on reading because that is the skill most closely correlated to student academic success or socioeconomic improvement in the United States. The definition of science-based research is taken from Title VIII of the No Child Left Behind legislation (P.L. 107-110) of 2001 and is considered by the U.S. Department of Education to represent the “gold standard” in educational research. This definition identifies five critical qualities of acceptable research: application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures; reliance on empirical evidence; experimental design with testable hypotheses; ability of the study to be replicated; peer-reviewed or otherwise approved by independent experts.

Five factors are found to be significant for affecting literacy development in English language learners across the lifespan: level of literacy proficiency in the first language; level of attained formal schooling in first language; second language proficiency; learner motivation; and professional development of instructors. This paper will include a discussion of best practices based on current knowledge, and conclude with implications for further research. Further research is needed to examine the role of first language proficiency and its transferability to learning literacy in English. We need to investigate the variability of time needed to attain proficiency in second language literacy. Finally, we need to examine the role that professional development plays in influencing teacher effectiveness.

Introduction

One of the fastest growing segments of the population of the United States is comprised of adult English language learners. Not all English language learners are immigrants. Many were born in the United States. The 2000 Census reported that 35 million adults are nonnative speakers of English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Nearly half of all adults enrolled in federally funded adult education programs are enrolled in classes for English language learners (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

The current administration in Washington, DC has made science-based research a cornerstone of all education reform, beginning with No Child Left Behind (PL 107-110) signed into law on January 8, 2002, the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Currently in committee is the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act. The working document proposed by the administration which outlines their vision for this legislation is entitled A Blueprint for Preparing America’s Future: The Adult Basic and Literacy Education Act of 2003. We can expect that the final version of this reauthorized legislation will have ample reference to the need for science-based evidence of student learning.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the current research base on which rests the practice of teaching primarily reading to adult English language learners. My stress will be on reading as that is likely to be the communication skill that will be most closely correlated to student success or socioeconomic improvement for English language learners.

Defining Science-Based Research

Because of the current emphasis of the federal government on science-based research, it is important to know how science-based research is defined. We can find this definition stated in the Reading Excellence Act. The Reading Excellence Act is actually Title VIII of the No Child Left Behind legislation. The Reading Excellence Act primarily funds programs through the states to improve reading instruction for children. Its purposes include: 1) teaching every child to read by the end of third grade; 2) providing pre-school children the readiness skills needed for leaving to read once they enter school; 3) expanding the numbers and quality of family literacy programs; 4) providing early intervention for at-risk children; 5) identifying reading instruction based on scientifically-based research.

The Reading Excellence Act goes on to define scientifically-based reading research as

- The application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge relevant to reading development, reading instruction, and reading difficulties;

- The use of systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment;

- The use of rigorous data analyses that are adequate to test stated hypotheses and justify conclusions;

- Reliance on measurements or observational methods that provide valid data across evaluations and across multiple measurements and observations; has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review.

Such a definition of science-based research places obvious weight on experimental design. This helps to explain the dichotomy in understandings of how reading is actually learned (Fletcher & Lyons, 1998; Smith, 2004). One effort to examine the research literature that represents the best information about how adults learn to read was published by the Partnership for Reading, an initiative of the National Institute for Literacy, the U.S. Department of Education, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This publication, Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction (Kruidenier, 2002), compiled by the Reading Research Working Group, was influenced by two previous reports, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), and Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Given that background, it is no wonder that the Reading Research Working Group attempted to find research that fit the definition in the legislation, and attempted to fit research into a conceptual framework that viewed learning to read as a skills-based activity, which sees reading as comprised of developing skills in phonemic awareness, word analysis, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension. Starting with the assumption that knowledge of K-12 reading instruction can inform adult reading instruction, the efforts of the Reading Research Working Group revealed a dearth of scientific-based research in adult reading, especially pertaining to adult English language learners. As a result, this group suggested that there is a great need for research to increase our understanding of how adult English language learners learn to read.

Given this suggestion, we cannot ignore the fact that there is a significant body of literature that already informs practice in the teaching of adult English language learners. A recent effort to

synthesize this literature base (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003) provides a more inclusive database on which to build further understanding than the base examined by the Reading Research Working Group. This literature base included studies that used, in addition to experimental or quasi-experimental methodologies, non-experimental methods and descriptive studies. The population of learners covered by these studies include, not only those adults enrolled in adult education programs, but also adults in college-based intensive English programs.

What Can We Learn From These Studies?

Regardless of age, the research can lead us to several common findings resulting from studies of young children and adults. Success at learning to read in a second language at any age is largely determined by level of literacy attained in the first language. One implication of this for adult education practice is that those adult learners with limited first language literacy would be well served by initial instruction in their first language. This implies a bilingual approach. On the other hand, many programs offer only an English-only approach to literacy in this program. Some programs may rightfully say that they cannot find qualified instructors who are literate in the learner's first language. Others don't try because of what they understand to be more effective instruction—total immersion.

For the vast majority of adult learners in our adult education programs, native language instruction is unrealistic. But neither is total immersion succeeding for the vast majority of the least schooled immigrants. A bilingual approach, incorporating both native language literacy support and English as a second language instruction in oral language, may have the best chance for success.

The review of literature synthesized by Burt, Peyton, and Adams (2003) identifies four factors as influential in second language literacy development for the adult English language learner: 1) literacy background in the first (home) language; 2) educational background; 3) proficiency in the second language; and 4) learners' goals. All four factors are also found as significant in young English language learners. A fifth factor, professional development, is added because of the heavy reliance in the field on semi-skilled instructors, many with little knowledge of teaching reading, knowledge of adult learning, or knowledge of second language acquisition.

First Language Literacy Background

In theorizing about second language development, Cummins (1979) offers the common underlying proficiency hypothesis. Accordingly, there are certain universal characteristics of learning to be literate across all languages. Slavin and Cheung (2004) conclude from a review of the literature that there is "a good deal of support for the idea that native language instruction can be beneficial for the English reading of English language learners" (p. 40). Once a learner is literate in the home language, acquiring literacy in a second language is enhanced. Adult education programs that enroll a high percentage of English language learners that are illiterate or semi-literate in their home language are not likely to be successful in teaching literacy in the second language without support of some first language instruction.

Educational Background

Collier and Thomas (2002) concluded after examining over 40,000 student files in K-12 education, that a major determiner of success for achieving success in a second language was

level of formal schooling in the home language. Positive experience in the home language educational systems reinforces the educational experience in learning a second language.

Second Language Proficiency

Second language proficiency is limited to knowledge of vocabulary and syntactic proficiency, or knowledge of language structure. Knowledge of vocabulary implies not only breadth of vocabulary, but also the learner's ability to analyze new words using a number of techniques. The implication is that rather than learning to read, the proficient reader reads to learn.

Learner Goals

Motivation is an important factor for adults learning to read. Commonly articulated goals of the adult learner include moving up the economic ladder, involvement in children's education, community participation, enhancing self-respect, and continuing education (Wrigley & Guth, 1992). These are all very instrumental goals and serve to facilitate learning, especially if they are incorporated into instruction.

Professional Development

Low levels of professional development continue to plague the field of adult education. Adult ESOL programs are affected by the part-time nature of employment, leading to high teacher turnover rates. Professional development is an ongoing need of programs, diverting important resources from the instructional mission (Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Implications for Further Research

Over the next several years, the U.S. government will be funding major research efforts to help us understand the process of second language literacy acquisition. These efforts need to recognize the distinct differences of second language literacy acquisition among children and adults. On one hand, some efforts need to examine the effectiveness of skills-based instruction, especially for adult second language learners who are proficient in their home language. For those other adults, it will be important to examine alternative, meaning-based approaches as well. Several questions that need answers are the following:

1. What is the role of home language literacy proficiency and how does that transfer to learning the second language?

2. We know that for children learning a second language in schools, as many as five to seven years of study is required to attain proficiency equivalent to their native English speaking peers. What length of time is required by adult learners to attain various levels of second language proficiency, especially in literacy?

3. Rather than a skills-based approach or a meaning-based approach, it is more likely that most adult learners will respond more positively to an approach that integrates the best of both approaches. But effective instruction in either approach requires training. To what degree is teacher effectiveness a function of professional development?

If we as a nation are serious about reaching our stated goal of complete literacy for all (National Education Goals Panel, 1993), will we be able to attain this goal without a better trained cadre of adult educators? This includes not only adult educators with the training in specific teaching

tools, but adult educators capable of conducting classroom-based research on their own teaching effectiveness.

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Richard A. Orem, Professor of Literacy Education, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb,. E-mail: rorem@niu.edu; (815)753.1688.

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